

SIGNAGE



Successful businesses today depend to a great degree on good advertising. A sensitively rehabilitated older commercial building is, by itself, an outstanding form of advertising because a handsomely restored commercial building will stand out from its undistinguished neighbors. A building's signage should always complement its architecture. Signage that is too abundant, too large, out of place, or stylistically inappropriate conveys a poor image of the business and will also detract not only from the aesthetic appeal and historic character of the building it is attached to, but also from the entire neighborhood. Exterior lighting is another advertising device that, when properly installed, can dramatically emphasize a business by highlighting the facade, signage and display windows of a building at night.

SIGNAGE

The primary purpose of a storefront sign is to identify the location and nature of a business to the public. Attractive, traditional signage is often relatively inexpensive when the cost is figured over the long service life of a sign. Unlike other popular mediums of advertising that are short-lived, such as direct mailings, billboards and newspaper advertisements, storefront signage can attract attention continuously over a period of many years. In fact, storefront signage is probably one of the best overall advertising values today. It is simply a matter of good economy to choose a sign with lasting appeal that is appropriate in design

■ Preceding page: The John Thompson plasterworks in the 1870s. (Photo: Milwaukee County Historical Society)

for the building it is to be mounted on and the business it is advertising.

There are many types of traditional signage that are appropriate for use on older storefronts including:

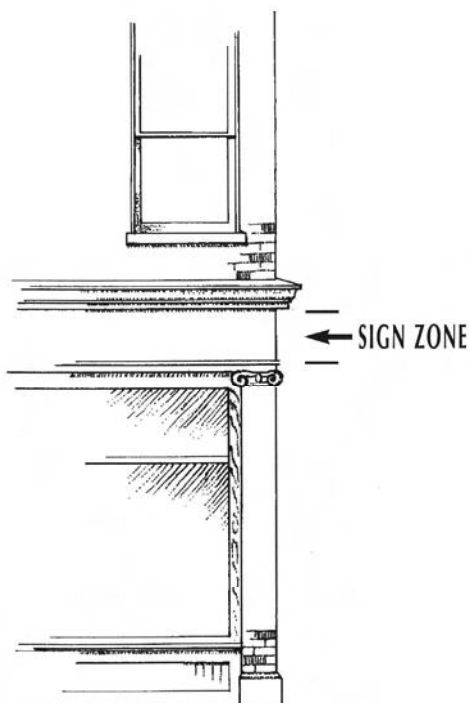
1. Raised or painted letters on a flush-mounted signboard.
2. Awning signs.
3. Gilded or painted letters on storefront display windows.
4. Wall-mounted cast bronze plaques or tablets.
5. Hanging signs mounted on brackets that project from a wall.
6. Sandblasted or etched structural glass signage.
7. Leaded glass transom lettering.
8. Neon signage.

The most common types of traditional signs, appropriate for nearly any pre-1940 commercial building in the city, are flat, flush-mounted signboards with raised or painted letters; gilded or painted lettering on the storefront display window; lettering sewn or stenciled on the flap of an awning; hanging signs; and cast bronze wall-mounted plaques.

As important as the style of the sign itself is where it is mounted on the building. Shop front signage must be located within specific zones on the front of a building in order to capture the attention of pedestrians and motorists and to complement or, at least not detract from, the architecture of the building.

Many older commercial buildings were actually designed with a sign zone, a large, flat area immediately above the shop front display windows where signboards were intended to be located. The primary signage should be confined to this area if at all possible, so it will complement the building's architecture and prevent a haphazard or cluttered looking building front. Signs should never project above the sill level of the second story windows. Very often the design of the storefront dictates which type of signage is most appropriate and will be the most effective. Display window lettering, for example, might be the most practical and visually effective form of signage if there is simply no room on the storefront to install a flush-mounted signboard above the display windows without covering up windows or architectural elements.

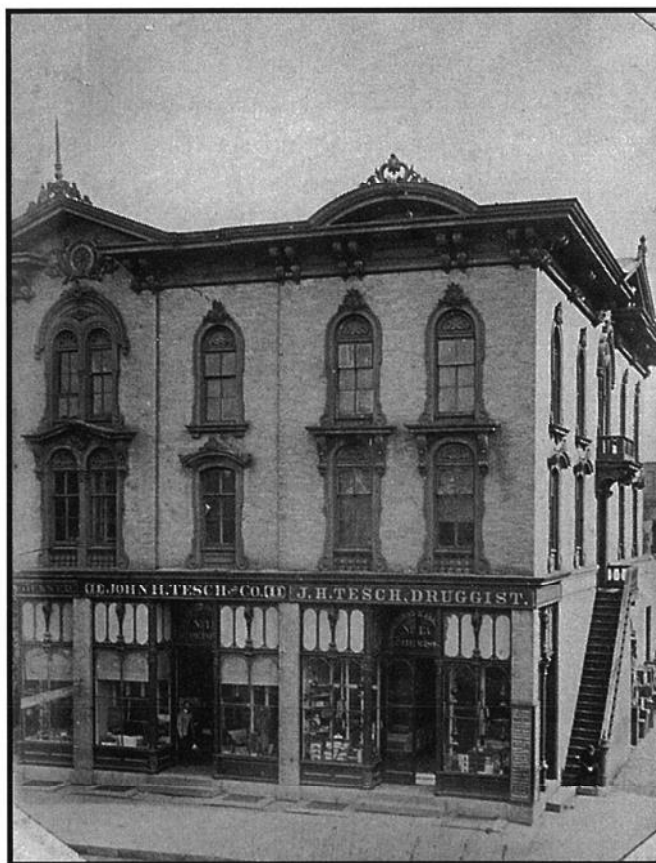
One of the most important things to keep in mind about signage is that one well-designed, appropriately sized and located sign is better than five poorly-designed signs. It is a great mistake to clutter the front of a building with multiple signs, as is often done on the mistaken premise that the more signs a business has the more the public will be attracted to it. In fact, just the opposite often occurs, since people are confused and repelled by signage that tries to convey too much information or creates a cluttered, disorganized image of a business. When signage becomes too loud or abundant, it no longer works to attract patrons because the mind no longer is capable of quickly sorting out the multiple messages being presented and tends to ignore the signage as mere visual pollution. When businessmen begin to compete with each other by trying to outdo their neighbors' signage



■ On many traditional storefronts, the signage was intended to go in a narrow band above the storefront called the sign zone.

with more and bigger signs, the entire visual character of a commercial strip can be changed to a tawdry, cheap image that may actually hurt business.

The modern, internally-lit, plastic faced box sign that is widely used today is generally not recommended for use on older buildings. The box sign is composed of a translucent plastic facing attached to a metal box frame that contains lighting equipment. Box signs have a bulky, modern, machine-made appearance that looks out of place on an older building that was intended to be fitted with thin, traditional sign boards.



■ A photograph of the J. H. Tesch Drug Store in the 1870s showing a traditional signage scheme with the lettering confined to the sign zone. (Photo: Milwaukee County Historical Society)

Compared with modern, internally-lit box signs, the design possibilities of traditional types of signage are more extensive and the visual effects can be much more aesthetically appealing and impressive. By suggesting that traditional signboard signage is highly desirable, we are not advocating the use of “rustic” signage made with rough-sawn lumber or old barn

boards because these signs do not create the antique or historic appearance that they are intended to, but rather look crude and frontierish and are out of character with Milwaukee’s sophisticated urban streetscapes.

Traditional signs were designed in accordance with specific, well thought-out principles that should be kept in mind today whenever a new sign is made for an older storefront.

1. Lettering should be readable and not crowded. Remember that even very large letters that are crowded together are difficult to read from a distance. Raised letters and painted letters with shadowing always require extra spacing.
2. When a sign contains more than one line of text, the different lines should be varied in lettering size. Different lettering styles were even sometimes used for different lines of text.
3. A sign should not feature more than three or, at most, four different colors; a two-color sign can be very effective.

4. Keep the information on the sign to a minimum and avoid clutter. Do not use the primary storefront architectural signage to advertise credit card logos, business hours, or other incidental information that detracts from the readability of the primary message of the sign.

LAKE VIEW
SAVINGS
~AND~
LOAN
ASSOCIATION

58
JOHN SMITH.
General
MERCHANDISE.
DRY GOODS,
NOTIONS,
GROCERIES,
SHOES
and
HARDWARE.

■ Two traditional lettering schemes using different styles and sizes of type.

Choosing a proper lettering style is vital to the appearance of most signs. It is important to understand a few basic facts about lettering in order to make informed decisions about signage that will effectively convey the intended message and enhance the architecture of an older storefront. There are three major categories of lettering, each of which include many individual substyles. The three are “serif,” “sans serif,” and “ornamental.”

A serif is a small, stroke-like projection at the top and bottom of a letter. Serifs reputedly originated with ancient Roman masons who terminated each lettering stroke in a slab of stone with a serif in order to correct the uneven appearance made by their tools. Serif style lettering is timeless in design and variations of it are still very popular today.

Letters that have no serif at all and are simply squared off at termination points, such as common block letters, are called “sans serif,” which means “without a serif.” Ornamental lettering is a catch-all category for a host of specially designed serif, sans serif and script-like lettering styles that are designed to reflect a special theme or mood. Serif and sans serif letters are popular for signage because they are generally easy to read and will complement many different architectural styles. Ornamental letters should be used with caution for sign work, primarily because they are often difficult to read from a distance.

Some of the most attractive signs are embellished with genuine gold leaf lettering, which has an unmistakable bright glow that enhances the appearance of a sign like no other material. Because of its highly reflective nature, gold leaf on a sign can often be seen at night even without direct illumination. This feature made the material a favorite with sign-makers years ago in the days before electric illumination. There is simply no convincing substitute for the eye-catching appearance of genuine gold leaf, which will last twenty years or more outdoors without tarnishing. Gold substitutes such as “bronzing” paints or imitation gold leaf sheets contain copper and will only appear shiny and golden for a short period of time before they dull and tarnish to a lackluster brownish color. Using gold leaf is not as expensive as one might think because enough material to cover about two square feet costs less than forty dollars. Gold leaf is



■ As this historic photograph shows, painted signboards were once the preferred type of signage. (Photo: Milwaukee Public Library)

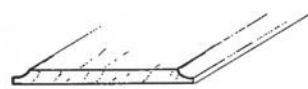
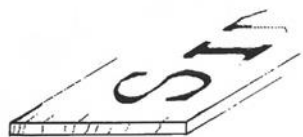
best used sparingly in sign work, as a small amount of gold leaf goes a long way in gilding letters or decorating a signboard. It is a particularly good material to use for the lettering on storefront display windows or glass entry doors. Many sign professionals today are experienced with gold leaf work and can produce outstanding results.

PAINTED SIGNBOARDS

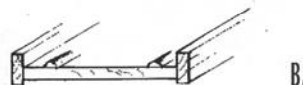
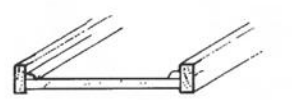
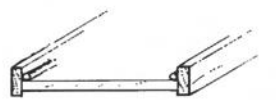
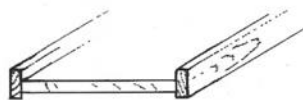
A flat signboard with hand-painted lettering was probably the most common type of architectural signage for older commercial buildings in the city. Painted lettering can accommodate an immense range of design effects, and it is still one of the most cost effective types of commercial signage.

Signboards were usually flat, rectangular, wooden or metal-clad panels that were enframed by a simple rolled molding or a backbanding. The board itself was typically painted a dark color, such as green, black or chocolate brown, and the letters were either painted in a contrasting colors, such as cream or white, or gilded with genuine gold leaf, although a light colored background with dark lettering was also sometimes used. The signboard was also often trimmed with a simple painted or gilded pinstriping motif near the edge. During the late nineteenth century, flat painted lettering was sometimes enhanced with a shadow or shading to simulate the appearance of three-dimensional raised letters. Signage with shaded lettering should generally be reserved for storefronts constructed before about 1905.

SIGNBOARDS CAN BE MADE IN MANY STYLES

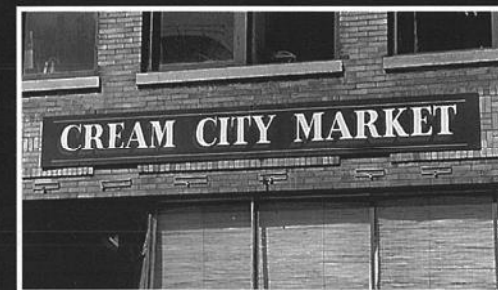
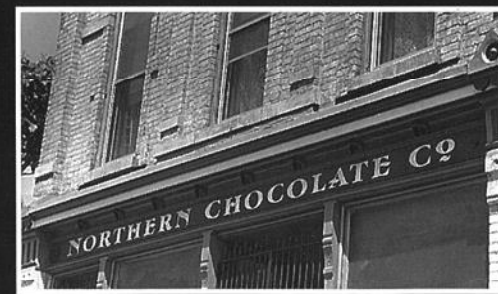


FLAT BOARDS WITH MOLDED EDGES



BANDED BOARDS WITH RAISED EDGES

THREE EXAMPLES OF MODERN PAINTED FLUSH-MOUNTED SIGNBOARDS

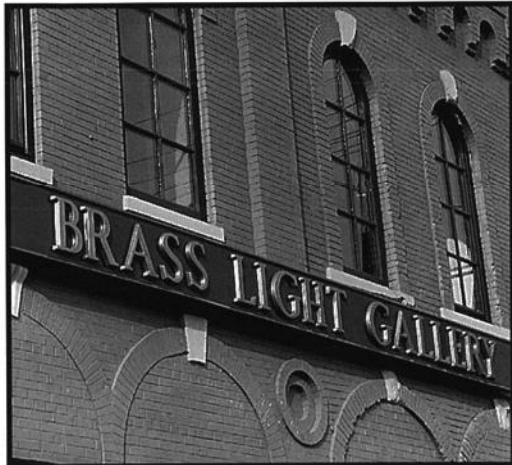


sans serif lettering on virtually any older commercial structure. During the nineteenth century some of the more conservative ornamental lettering styles were also used for sign work, but signmakers tended to avoid fussy, ornate lettering styles because they recognized that they are frequently difficult to read.

RAISED LETTER SIGNBOARDS

The flat signboard with raised, individual letters was a very common type of commercial signage in Milwaukee before about 1940, and it is still one of the best types of signage. Easy to construct and very attractive, the design of this signage has changed very little over the last 150 years, a testament to the fact that good design never really goes out of style.

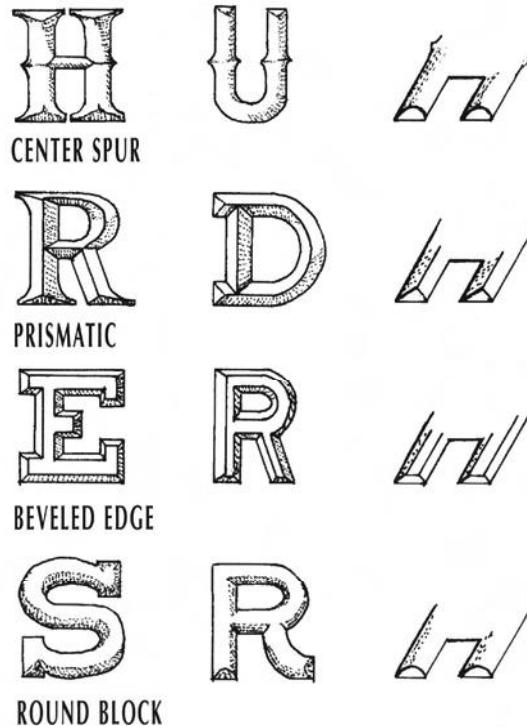
Raised letters were usually made of sawn wood with eased or rounded edges, but bronze and other



■ A modern raised letter sign of traditional design.

cast metal letters were used where permanence and low maintenance were desired. Raised letters, regardless of the material, are often gilded with genuine gold or aluminum leaf or painted with special imitation gold or silver metallic finishes to simulate the appearance of

FOUR COMMON STYLES OF RAISED LETTERS



bright, precious metals. Bronze letters were sometimes polished and lacquered to maintain a bright, golden finish.

Today, cast bronze letters are still available and are still considered to be a premium material. Also available are a variety of wooden, composition, and raised plastic letters that can be gilded or painted.

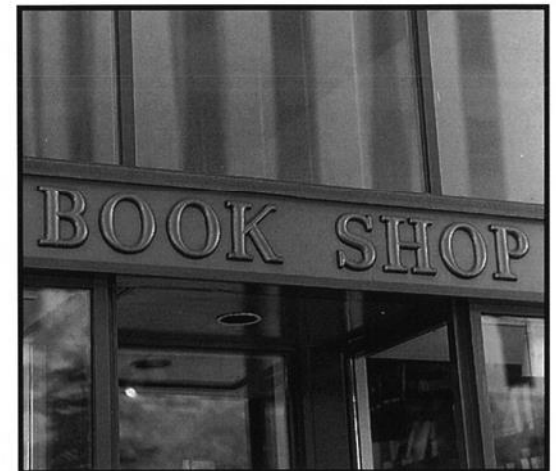
The edges of the letters were usually shaped or rounded, which added depth, shadow lines and visual interest to the sign. Four of the most common edge treatments are:

CENTER SPUR Gently rounded on all sides with a distinctive pointed node or spur on the outside of each vertical stroke.

PRISMATIC Sharply beveled on the face to a V-shaped profile.

BEVELED EDGE A flat-faced letter with a modest chamfered edge on all sides.

ROUND BLOCK Rounded or radiused surface that is half-round in profile.



■ Raised letter signage conveys an image of quality and permanence.

Raised letters for signs were usually conservative in design, and, as has been said, very ornate styles of lettering were avoided. In general, a basic serif lettering, such as "Roman" or its equivalent would be highly readable and historically appropriate for raised letter signage on most pre-1940 small commercial buildings. Keep in mind that raised letters require extra spacing compared with flat, painted letters in order to avoid a crowded appearance, which would make the sign difficult to read from a distance. Raised letters were also sometimes attached directly to the building, without a sign board backing, and this is still an accepted practice today.

The sign board background for both flat, painted letters and raised letters was usually very similar. When raised gilded letters were set on a signboard painted a rich, dark green, black, red or royal blue, the result was very striking and readable. Signboards that feature raised letters should generally be bordered with a rolled wooden or metal molding. A simple, pinstripe painted border was also a popular enhancing feature.

AWNING SIGNS

An awning sign is composed of stenciled or sewn-on canvas lettering that is attached to the edge flap or "skirting" of a fabric awning. Whether the awning is fully retracted or open, the information on the skirting remains visible. An awning sign was sometimes the primary form of storefront signage

used by a small business years ago, particularly when the design of the building did not permit the installation of a signboard above the display windows. An awning sign can also be an effective adjunct to display window lettering or to a projecting hanging sign. For example, the hanging signboard could feature the name of the business and the awning signage could



■ A typical early twentieth century awning sign augmented with signage painted on the display windows. (Photo: Milwaukee Public Library)

include the address of the building and a one- or two-word description of the products sold by the business.

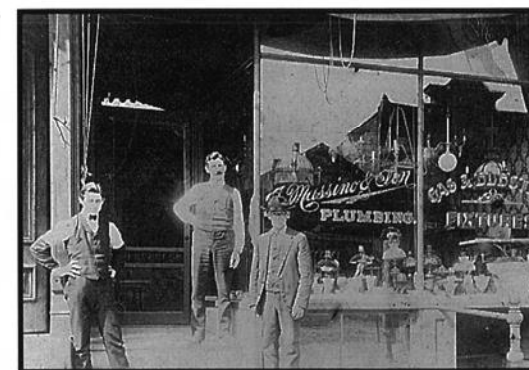
The lettering on an awning skirt is limited to a height of about 6 inches and is best executed in a very simple, bold, sans-serif style. In some cases, a large logo was sewn or stenciled on top of the awning that was visible when the awning was open. Awnings should never be made of shiny plastic materials. For a classy, traditional look, canvas-look acrylic or similar fabrics

should be used. See the Storefront chapter for additional information on awning construction and design.

DISPLAY WINDOW LETTERING

Another common type of storefront signage is lettering painted directly on the interior side of storefront display windows and glazed entry doors. Display window lettering was often the first choice for signage because it was at eye level, which is the ideal height when appealing to pedestrians. It was also used when the architectural design of the building did not include a space for a signboard. By the early 1920s, display window lettering was preferred by most merchants for primary storefront signage because it avoided the sign cluttered building facades associated with the then out-of-fashion Victorian era.

One of the distinctive features of signage painted on storefront display windows before about 1900 was arranging some of the words in a curve or



■ In the Victorian period, lettering on glass was a very popular type of signage. (Photo: Collection of Dr. Vaughn Simmons)



■ Painted lettering on glass can be a highly effective type of signage, whether it's contemporary in style or traditional.

arc. This design practice can be used today when a period style effect is desired for a storefront of pre-1905 design. During the early twentieth century, however, lettering set in straight lines was generally preferred for window signs, and curvilinear designs were generally avoided.

GLASS SIGNAGE

Flush-mounted sign panels made of sandblasted or acid-etched glass were up-scale alternatives to the more usual wooden or metal signboards installed above storefront display windows. Glass signage was in fashion from about 1890 through the 1930s. It was a very appealing and versatile medium that was easily adapted to the rapid changes in architectural styles and tastes that occurred during the early twentieth century. One of the outstanding attributes of an etched or sandblasted glass sign is that it can feature extensive ornament without obscuring the readability of the lettering.

When glass is exposed to sandblasting or etching chemicals, the smooth surface is eroded to a uniform, grainy-textured, snow-white appearance. Etched

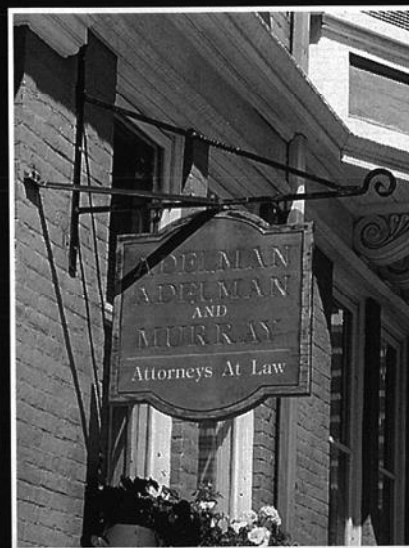
areas of glass were sometimes gilded with gold or silver leaf or painted with dark, rich enamels to further highlight the sign. At the turn-of-the-century, glass signs tended to be embellished with elaborate flourishes and other ornament that reflected the architectural tastes of the day. The signs were typically mounted on a painted wooden or metal backboard to enhance the readability of the lettering etched on the front. No historic examples of Victorian era glass signs survive in Milwaukee today.

Glass signs were made of clear or colored plate glass, and in the 1920s, '30s and '40s with opaque structural glass, such as Carrara and Vitrolite (see Glass chapter). Today, safety glass, which resists shattering, should always be used for signage instead of regular plate glass. Lettering etched or sandblasted into a



■ An etched, Art Deco style, Carrara glass sign from the 1920s.

HANGING SIGNS COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES



sheet of polished, black glass, makes a dramatic, sleek-looking sign that is particularly appropriate for Art Deco and Art Moderne style storefronts of 1920 to 1950 vintage. A few structural glass, Art Deco style signs from this era still survive in Milwaukee.

HANGING SIGNS

A hanging sign is composed of a painted signboard attached to a metal bracket that projects from a building wall. Hanging signs were somewhat limited in popularity in Milwaukee, partially because the signs can obscure each other when too many are concentrated in one area. Hanging signs, for the most part, tended to be small and served as an adjunct to the principal, large, flat signboard or display window lettering.

Hanging signs were sometimes made in the likeness of objects or symbols associated with a particular type of business, such as a locksmith's keys, a loaf of bread for a baker, or golden balls for a pawnbroker.

The following guidelines should be kept in mind when planning a hanging sign:

1. The sign must, by local ordinance, be secured at both the top and bottom and must not swing freely. The bottom of the sign must be at least 10 feet above the sidewalk.
2. Hanging signs should not obscure the signage of other nearby businesses. In general, they should be fairly small.
3. Signs and brackets should be made and mounted to complement the architecture of the building and be

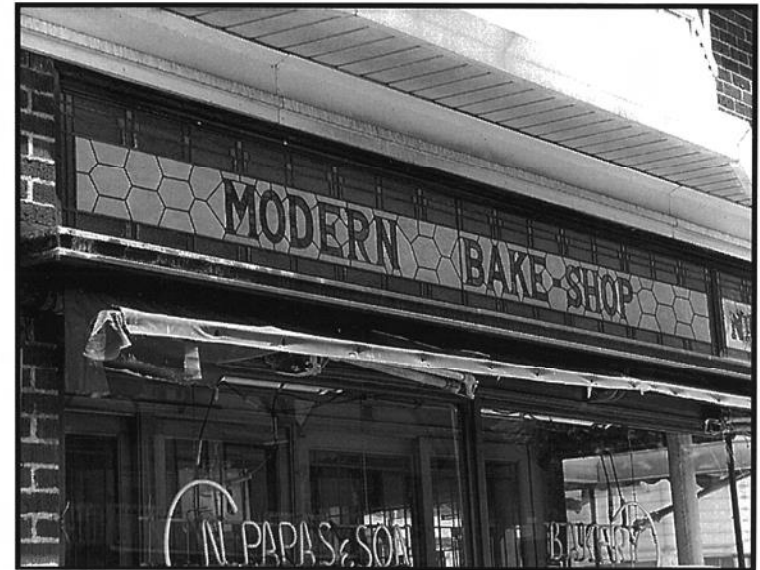
mounted so the fasteners go into the mortar joints on masonry building rather than into the face of the brick or stone.

4. The sign can be lit, if that is desired, with gooseneck incandescent fixtures or with small, inconspicuous spotlights mounted on the building that are aimed to shine on the sign at night.

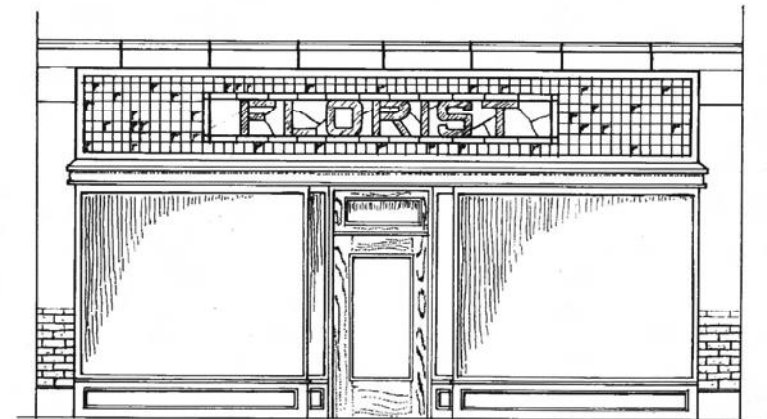
TRANSOM SIGNS

A transom sign is made of leaded glass letters that are built-in to the transom above a storefront display window or door. Leaded glass transom signs first became popular during the late 1880s, but probably did not reach the zenith of their popularity until the 1920s. A unique feature of a transom sign is that it can be illuminated at night by backlighting or simply from the glow of interior store lights.

Transom signs can still be made today by leaded glass craftworkers. Years ago, a transom sign was installed as a permanent, inseparable part of a building by a business that intended to remain in that location for a long period of time. This is probably not practical today because of the rapid turn over of tenants in



■ Leaded glass transom signs are unique and eye-catching, especially when backlit at night.



■ This drawing shows a typical storefront where the transom is used as a sign.

many commercial buildings, but a new transom sign can be made as an easy-to-remove panel which could be replaced when tenants change.

NEON SIGNAGE

Neon signs were not introduced until about 1926, but they rapidly became popular. During the late 1920s and 1930s, many new and old storefronts were fitted with neon signage. Neon, first discovered in 1898, is the name of a gas that can be sealed inside a glass tube and made to glow when a high voltage electrical current is passed through it.



■ Neon signs mounted in a window are eye-catching and appropriate for most types of commercial buildings.

The appeal of neon signage declined in the 1970s, but, with the recent revival of interest in traditional building products, neon sign-making is currently enjoying a renaissance. Neon was used for both interior and exterior signage years ago, but today new neon signs are mostly mounted on the interior side of display windows in place of lettering on glass. Neon is a dramatic advertising tool, and there are many competent neon sign artists who can create new signage that will complement an older storefront. Exterior

neon signs are most appropriate for use on post-1920s commercial buildings. Neon signage mounted inside display windows can be successfully adapted for use on all types of commercial structures.

CAST BRONZE TABLETS OR PLAQUES

Small, but visually distinctive signage can be provided by a solid bronze tablet or plaque. Most often bronze signage is placed at the eye level of pedestrians at the corner of a storefront or close to an entry door. Although bronze signage is often associated with banks, libraries and other institutions, it is also suitable for use on many types of small commercial structures. Bronze is an elegant, lifetime material that will not deteriorate. It needs no maintenance, although periodically the raised letters can be buffed to a gleaming shine and then sealed with lacquer to maintain a top appearance.

Because a bronze tablet is made in one monolithic piece, it is resistant to vandalism. Bronze tablets



■ Cast bronze plaques convey a dignified image.

should always be attached to a building with tamper-resistant screws. Bronze signs are affordable and are generally made to order by firms that specialize in that type of work.

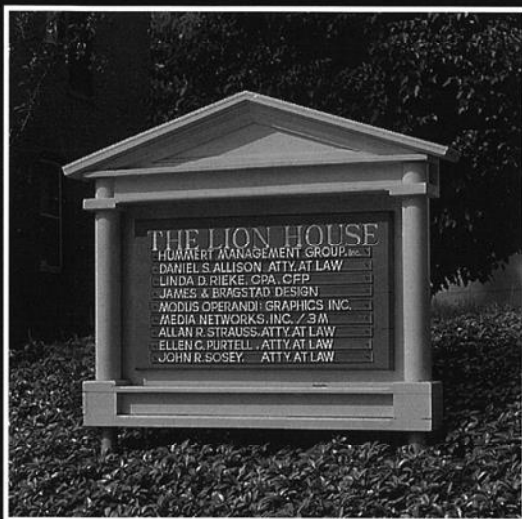
YARD SIGNS

Freestanding yard signage is often needed in situations where an old house, set behind a grassy lawn, is now being used for commercial purposes. Most yard signs appropriate for use with an older building are made of wood and feature either a painted signboard mounted on wooden posts, or a changeable message board that is set behind glass inside an ornamental wooden box frame. Freestanding, modern, plastic-faced metal box signs that are internally illuminated are generally not recommended. These signs are fine for a lawn installation near a modern building, but are usually not compatible with the architecture of an older building.

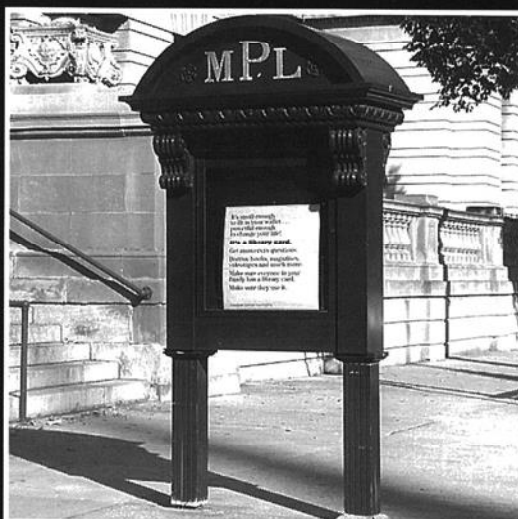
The simplest and least expensive yard sign for an older building is composed of a painted signboard mounted on one or two posts set in the ground. The post can be either round or square and capped with a small, ornamental finial. The signboard can be trimmed with moldings and lettered in the same manner as any traditional, flush-mounted signage described in this chapter.

Ornamental wooden box signs are recommended when a changeable message board is required. A wooden ornamental box sign is an excellent alternative to an unappealing, plain metal box sign because it can be designed to complement the architecture of the building it will be in front of. Wooden box signs

FOUR TYPES OF YARD SIGNS



■ A directory sign.



■ An announcement board.



■ A yard sign of traditional design.



■ A post-mounted hanging sign.

should always be made of high-quality lumber that is known to be decay resistant. (See the Wood chapter for more information on the selection of construction lumber.) Wooden box signs can also be trimmed with the stamped sheet metal ornament that is available from several manufacturers at reasonable prices if a more ornamental effect is required.

A yard sign can be economically illuminated at night by an exterior light source, such as a recessed “uplight” or “well fixture” that is concealed in the ground immediately below the signboard. A small, above ground, stake-mounted fixture that is focussed on the signboard is also acceptable, but not as desirable because it is more likely to be damaged and can detract from the appearance of the sign. Wooden box signs can be illuminated with an internal light source.

LIGHTING

The goal of any exterior storefront lighting project should be to highlight a building and its signage to the best possible advantage. Poorly designed storefront lighting can be avoided by keeping a few broad design guidelines in mind during the planning process.

Exterior lighting for small commercial buildings is typically dedicated to a specific purpose, such as the illumination of signage, accenting the facade of the building, or illuminating the entrance vestibule or shopfront window. The overall visual effect of any exterior lighting project depends to a great extent on two factors: the design and placement of the light fixture and the type of light bulb, more correctly called a “lamp,” that the fixture is designed to accommodate.

As a general rule, exterior light fixtures should be as inconspicuous as possible except for ornamental hanging fixtures, lanterns or sconces. The conduits or surface raceway that are sometimes necessary to supply power to exterior fixtures should not be visible to passersby on the street. Conduits that are visible should be painted to match the color of surrounding building materials. Plastic conduits are difficult to keep painted and should therefore be avoided.

Some of today's modern lamps, because of their shape and the color of light they emit, are better suited to enhance the architecture and signage of a fine,



■ A well-lighted storefront creates a positive image of a business even after closing time.

older storefront than other lamps. In fact, the illumination of some lamps can actually detract from the appearance of a building or sign at night.

The three major types of lamps are incandescent, fluorescent, and high intensity discharge. Although these lamps differ considerably in terms of service life and replacement cost, it is the quality of light emitted by a lamp that should be the foremost concern in choosing exterior lighting. The following table shows the overall compatibility of today's major types of lamps with common storefront lighting projects.

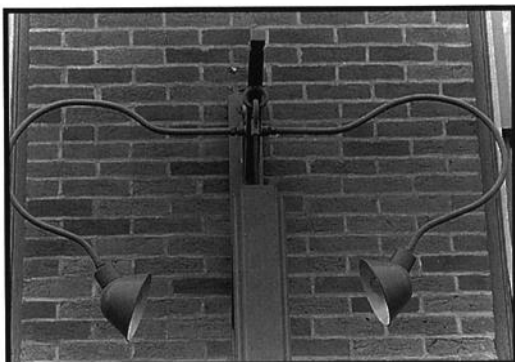
The common incandescent lamp is still the best overall choice for accurately illuminating colored surfaces, and it emits a pleasing light that is closest to approximating the warm glow of a candle. Incandescent lamps are highly recommended for illuminating small projecting signs and flat signboards mounted above storefront display windows. Signboards can be illuminated with the traditional gooseneck style light fixture that is composed of a projecting, curved pipe called a "conduit" that is fitted on the end with a lampholder and a round, pan-shaped metal shade. The gooseneck fixture has been used to illuminate signs for at least 90 years, and today it is still a stylish, efficient, and low cost method to illuminate a sign on an older storefront.

There are also many small, incandescent lighting fixtures suitable for highlighting or floodlighting the facade of a commercial building. The fixtures should be as small as possible to minimize their appearance and, preferably, hidden or obscured by some architectural element of the building. Avoid installing facade lighting where the fixture will be a

| | Signage | Facade Floodlighting/Highlighting | Ornamental Shopfront Fixtures |
|----------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Incandescents | yes | yes | yes |
| Fluorescents | yes | yes | no |
| High Intensity Discharge: | | | |
| Metal Halide | yes | yes | no |
| High Pressure Sodium | yes | yes | no |
| Low Pressure Sodium | no | no | no |
| Mercury Vapor | no | no | no |

focus of attention and thereby detract from the character of the building. Remember, too, that bright floodlights may not flatter a small building and that smaller, less intense "accent lights" are usually better suited to enhance the architectural details of an older building at night.

The familiar fluorescent lamp, recognizable by its long, tubular shape, is more energy efficient than an incandescent lamp, but it is not a good choice for illuminating colors, particularly red, to the best advantage. Many fluorescent fixtures are large and boxy in design, and therefore have very limited uses in storefront illumination. However, there are some special, modern, exterior, architectural fluorescent fixtures designed specifically for facade lighting that are relatively small in profile and can also be used for lighting painted signboards and accenting architectural features. Fluorescent fixtures should not be installed beneath fixed awnings,



■ Gooseneck light fixtures are a traditional and attractive way to illuminate signage (above) or to provide general exterior lighting (below).

as is often now done, because the glowing awning, so commonly seen today on modern buildings, is not compatible with the architecture of older buildings.

Metal halide and high pressure sodium lamps are tops in terms of energy efficiency and are often used for floodlighting or architectural accenting purposes. Metal halide lamps offer good renditions of color and are popular for floodlighting very large facades. High pressure sodium lamps are slightly more energy efficient, but produce an unusual golden white light that may not be

appropriate in most situations, depending on the colors of the building materials that are to be illuminated.

Low pressure sodium lamps are not recommended for storefront lighting because colors illuminated by the light appear as drab tones of either gray or yellow. Mercury vapor lamps also produce light that distorts colors to unappealing blue-tinted hues.

WINDOW VALANCES

The display window valance has been nearly forgotten today, but it was once an important part of early twentieth century display window decor.

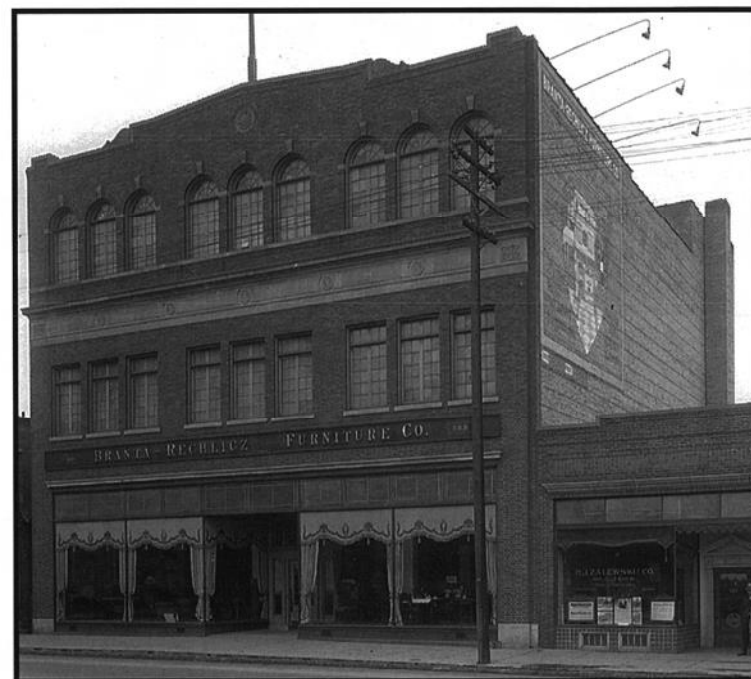
A valance is a curtain-like interior trimming installed at the top of a display window to conceal light fixtures and trim the window. As an adjunct or complement to storefront signage, the valance often featured the name of the business or its monogram centered in the panel.

Valances were made of a variety of materials including silk, velvet, silver metallic cloth, special fade-resistant woven fabrics and thin, painted boards. Many valances were trimmed at the bottom with a decorative fringe or tassels. The top of the glass in the display window was also sometimes painted in imitation of a fabric valance.

The display window valance was a stylistic innovation of the early

twentieth century, and it was particularly popular for trimming storefronts between 1915 and 1935. A valance was often not installed, however, if the storefront was fitted with an awning that would block the view of the window top and, thereby, the valance.

Installing a valance might be considered today as an economical and novel method of dressing up an early twentieth century storefront. Sign painters today can easily recreate a painted valance on the glass of a display window, and most drapery makers should have no trouble creating a fabric valance when supplied with an old photo or an accurate drawing of an original display window valance. ■



■ A store with window valances in the 1920s. (Photo: Kwasniewski Collection, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)